

# **Making Art, Making Choices: A Study of the Art and Writing of Youthful Offenders**

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Current practices of incarceration in the United States are coming under increasing scrutiny: arrest and incarceration rates for female offenders, particularly female juvenile offenders, continue to rise despite the steady decrease in overall crime rates in the last decade (OJJDP). The standards and practices for incarcerating youth in our country vary tremendously from state-to-state and many states (including Ohio) are under pressure to reform sentence-lengths, disciplinary practices, and rehabilitative efforts in the juvenile system (Demartini; Ludlow). The problems and criticism concerning juvenile justice are representative of the broader problems and criticism of the adult prison system in our country – adult prisons are growing faster than our population and faster than our crime rate<sup>1</sup> – and juvenile justice in America has come to symbolize a final threshold in arguments about whether prisons should rehabilitate or punish.

In this paper I analyze how art and writing empower prisoners to counter reductive representations of criminality. Specifically, I analyze how students at a juvenile corrections facility in Ohio rhetorically identify with and/or refuse the labels of “criminal” and “victim” in their poetry and artwork. I directly observed art classes offered at a local juvenile corrections facility<sup>2</sup>, facilitated by a community arts organization, ArtSafe, and also studied ArtSafe’s publications of artworks produced by adult offenders at the Ohio Reformatory for Women. I wanted to learn first-hand about how the participants in the classes respond through their art and creative writing to the pedagogical goals brought in by the organization – “outsiders” entering

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the institutions – and how the goals and processes in art-making itself are shaped by these institutional environments. The goal of ArtSafe is violence prevention and nonviolence education through the arts. They are concerned that youth at risk for violence, and particularly youth already incarcerated, do not have access to the arts or other avenues for expressing themselves, and they see art as an outlet for self-expression and a means for building self-esteem, as well as for transforming traditional punitive models of punishment. ArtSafe facilitators emphasize choices and individual empowerment in art; however, in spite of art's empowering potential, it is impossible for the participants in a prison art class to make choices outside the boundaries of the institution.

Although all acts of making art may invoke the potential for individual choices, analyzing the works produced in ArtSafe's various corrections-based art classes reveals the choices the participants perceived to be available to them in creating their artistic expressions.

Contemporary rhetorical studies is primarily concerned with persuasion or, as Kenneth Burke has suggested, "identification:" the motivation for all communicative acts, driven by our desire to be a part of society. In my project I use rhetorical theories of identification to analyze the rhetorical practices used by subjects in their attempts to recognize and align themselves with – as well as distinguish themselves from – the discourses in their surrounding environments.

Rhetorical theorist Michel de Certeau argues that all communication acts must be understood as both *uses of* and *performances on* dominant language systems because all individuals are constantly using and adapting imposed knowledge and symbols to their own interests and needs (33). In his examination of how people respond to dominant cultural discourses and practices de Certeau distinguishes between "strategies" and "tactics:" he uses the term *strategies* to describe how institutions and structures of power generate control, and the term *tactics* to describe how

individuals create space for themselves in environments designed by strategies. I will argue that the art and writing produced by the art class participants represent uses of and performances on the institutions in which they were created; the participants identify the language and behavior patterns, customs, expectations, and rules of their institutional environment, and appropriate them in ways that disrupt their formations or intended contexts; constitute new audience for their artwork that undermines or subverts the institutional audience; and construct narratives in their art and writing that subvert the temporal relationships prescribed by the institution.

ArtSafe participants represent and appropriate the institution's primary strategies for control by incorporating images of things like their cells or their uniforms into their art, thereby reifying their bond to the institution and also foregrounding their resistance to it. Phyllis Kornfeld argues that artists "use and reuse standard symbols to illustrate their condition, vent their frustrations, and communicate to others that they are loving, sensitive, strong, and noble, in spite of constant feedback to the contrary, and have a sense of humor, in spite of their awful circumstances" (25). **Figure 1**, created by Acacia Hendricks<sup>3</sup> during her participation in an ArtSafe class at the Ohio Reformatory for Women, provides an example of the ways in which the art class participants recreate dominant images of the institution in their artwork: Hendricks provides a humorous depiction of "hot fashion straight from the pen" and points out important features of the institution's uniform, including the ID badge "to be worn on the left collar" that "completes the prison chic look," "baggy, saggy" khaki pants that "can be worn to achieve that thugged-out look so popular in prison," and green button-down shirts, of which she says "stained, ripped, neon button-downs are all the rage with the felon girls!" Hendricks also depicts a contraband hair clip (made from thread and bobby pins), earrings (made from staples; "guarantees cell isolation in prison"), and makeup (made from colored pencils). Hendricks, who

is serving a life sentence, titles her drawing “Lifer Collection by O.R.W.” De Certeau argues that practices of reading are also practices of invention: we “poach” texts, insinuating into them our own pleasures and memories, thereby making the texts we read “habitable” (xxi). Hendricks makes her institutional environment more “habitable” by depicting, reflecting back at it really, its strategies of control through her drawing. Her depictions of contraband in her drawing are particularly interesting because they provide her with a way to demonstrate her knowledge of how to break the rules without, perhaps, actually having to break them. In other words, it’s possible that Hendricks is depicting her own staple earrings and make-up in her drawing, but it’s also possible that she’s depicting an imagined self who is wearing this contraband without fear of punishment.

Similarly, in the art project pictured in **Figure 2**, Alicia, an ArtSafe participant at the juvenile corrections facility, imagines herself as simultaneously a physical part of the institution and as leaving it. Alicia represents herself as literally coming out of the prison wall, and explained to me that “this is my life: in and out of places like this.”<sup>4</sup> Her message, “look behind the mask,” addresses audiences who she believes discount the art that she and the other participants make because the girls are young and in a corrections institution. “A lot of people have hidden messages in their art and they want someone to see it,” like “what they’re feeling inside or a hidden face.” Through her artwork Alicia identifies herself with a dominant feature of her institution and of correctional confinement more generally – a brick wall – and at the same time appropriates this feature to resist her identification with the institution.

Loss of privacy is a crucial part of understanding this artwork: individuals in a corrections facility have little control over how information about them circulates. In general, the offense with which they are charged is a primary identifier for them both in the institution

and in the legal system. Public representations of crime further reinforce our identification of an individual by her or his offense by virtually guaranteeing audiences of fictional and news representations of crimes access to knowing *who did it* and *what they did*, and frequently *what they did* is all we really find out about *who did it*. The art class participants address not only the institution's knowledge of their offense but also the "right to know" that the public has come to expect, by refusing to reveal their offense in their art and writing. Although they have the opportunity to re-tell these events from their perspective, almost all of the participants choose a tactic of silence instead.

Cheryl Glenn argues that "silence is rhetorical," an "act of invention" that "addresses the politics of speaking, not speaking, and who can speak" (12). For the ArtSafe participants, silence is a tactic available for addressing the loss of privacy that they experience upon entering the corrections facility, as well as the discursive expectations the institution prescribes upon them, and it ultimately constitutes new audiences for their artwork that undermine or subverts the institutional audience. **Figure 3** was created as part of an activity called "found poetry," in which participants in the juvenile facility class cut-up poems written by women at the Ohio Reformatory for Women to make new poems. For her project Lisa combined lines from two other poems to create a hanging art/poetry piece dedicated to her best friend and a secret they share: "I've never told a secret/ The day will come I will hold the key to her heart I'm a complex girl." She created her poem by adopting words and phrases from the poems "I Hold a Secret," written by Tauheedah Muhammed, and "A Caged Bird," written by Juanita Kennedy. Muhammad's poem focuses on what it feels like to keep a secret about herself but does not reveal what the secret is:

Strange of me,/ but I've been told that I'm a complex girl./ I hold a secret I've never told  
that burns in my heart and makes me cold./ I hold the key to doors unknown;/ what hides  
inside goes untold./

Kennedy's poem focuses on feelings of confinement and also of being the object of surveillance:

"They put her in a cage to keep her from flying. They bring people into stare or even just to glare. Even though it seems unfair, she knows these people really don't care."

The tactic of silence as used by the ArtSafe participants also resists the expectations of confession and remorse prescribed by the institution; stating their convicted offense and demonstrating remorse is a core feature of the Victim Awareness classes that juvenile and adult offenders participate in during their incarceration, and in juvenile institutions successful completion of Victim Awareness is often a mandatory condition for release. The ArtSafe participants resist this confessional mode by reframing their relationship to their conviction through phrases such as "I caught a case" or "when I was picked up" that appear frequently in their writing. Patricia O'Connor has suggested that this language indicates the speaker's lack of agency, and is the product of "the prison's compartmentalizing of prisoners into normalizing categories of criminality" (15), but I would argue that these phrases are also *performances on* institutional discourse in their resistance of the institution's confessional expectations.

The ArtSafe participants further respond to the loss of privacy they experience by invoking audiences outside the boundaries of the art class and institution in their art and writing. By constructing familial and social identifications in their works they assert themselves as members of communities beyond the institution; they reject the limits of their prescribed institutional identity, and the discursive strategies that define incarceration in America more

broadly. Aside from clandestine photographs of family and friends and coded references to prohibited relationships with other girls, the most common resistances to institutional rules that appear in the ArtSafe participants' art and writing reference their home in some way. In **Figure 4** Kaylee identifies herself as "Miss Atl" because she was partly raised in Atlanta, but also identifies herself with Cleveland, the city where she lived most recently. She includes the area codes for both Cleveland (440) and Atlanta (770), which is forbidden by the institution because area codes are often used to represent gang affiliations. The creator of the mask in **Figure 5**, Marissa, is also originally from Atlanta, and includes the area codes for Atlanta and for her home town of Akron (216). Both of these pieces also prominently feature black and red, which is common in Kaylee and Marissa's work as well as the work of several other participants, and may also potentially reflect gang affiliations. Because Marissa's record (**Figure 6**) names Georgia instead of Atlanta, and because it does not include any area codes, it was allowed to be included in the hanging mural with records and cds from the entire class (**See Figure 7**). However, Dianna's record and cds (**Figure 8**) were not allowed to be included in the mural because they reference "Glass City," her hometown of Toldedo, as well as her nickname ("Mia Baby").

The ArtSafe participants also use their art and writing to assert a different time narrative than that prescribed by the institution: their relationship to the institution is defined by their arrest and the end of their sentence; in other words their identity is defined by their crime. In their artwork and writing the participants reference various other times and places outside of their "institutional time" in order to complicate this institutional narrative and to provide a broader picture of their lives. For example, in her poem "Survival," Heather Young writes:

In the beginning I was a rose/ with no thorns/ Left unprotected/ To nature's horns./ I tried  
to blossom/ Through it all/ Yet, danger came to call./ I lost my pride/ And tried to hide/

From danger's preying eyes – / It came with so many lies./ To swoop and steal/ With so much zeal,/ My precious little flowers,/ My tears fell in showers./ Gradually I began to evolve / Having my dilemma solved./ Thorns I did form / So I could be newly born./ And with confidence / I faced the world.

Young's narrative of transformation challenges dominant rehabilitation narratives that more typically represent change in prison. These representations often depict inmates who enter the institution angry and without regret for their crimes, and then, often through contact with a prison ministry program of some kind, take responsibility for the wrongs they have committed and demonstrate remorse. In some representations, such as *Dead Man Walking*, the prisoner's redemption is concluded by receiving forgiveness before his execution; in others, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the prisoner eventually leaves the facility rehabilitated (and in the case of Malcolm X of course politically involved) and motivated to inspire others with the story of their transformation. In both cases, the prison (via its programs or other people within the prison) is the agent of transformation for the individual. In Young's poem, however, she is the transformative agent, and her transformation takes place before her incarceration. Whereas the Victim Awareness classes require the offenders to confess their crimes and focus on the experiences of their victims, Young and others redefine these institutional categories of "victim" by making *us* aware of the victimization *they* have experienced. In his introduction to *Couldn't Keep it to Ourselves*, a collection of short stories written by women incarcerated at the York Correctional Institution in Connecticut, Wally Lamb writes that "[t]o imprison a woman is to remove her voice from the world, but many female inmates have been silenced by life long before the transport van carries them from the courthouse to the correctional facility" (9).



Importantly, although Young's poem tells a story of how her violent experiences helped her develop "thorns" to protect herself, at the beginning and end of her poem she is whole and unharmed: whereas traditional representations of prison transformation begin with a damaged individual (just as the institution's relationship with the individual begins with her conviction), Young tells us that in the beginning she was a rose. At the end of her poem, although she has grown protective thorns after surviving violence, she has been "newly born" and faces the world with confidence.

In another piece, titled "Nothing in the World," Corrinne focuses on childhood experiences of trauma.

She was turning a corner she felt deep in a cloud of deep and dark cloudy days. She's eight years old she's in a foster home being molested by her foster dad. She's only eight years old. She feels real nasty and sad. She hurts inside. Cries all the time. Only time she don't get hurt is when her foster mom is around. What is this? Nothing but hurt. She thinks all day wishing she can run away. She feels like there's nothing in the world she don't understand what she got in the world though because she's still a young girl eight years old and all alone no one to run to not even at school. She's so scared but all the pain she don't realize there's other people out there that care.

Confessional narratives remain a dominant mode particularly in literary representations of incarceration. H. Bruce Franklin observes this as a consistent feature in the history of American prison literature: "[t]he criminal narrator characteristically is confessing his or her crimes, and this confession, especially its moral lesson, is ostensibly the purpose of the whole narrative" (126). However, Franklin notes that although the intention of the literature may be a moral

lesson, the main interest for readers “lies in vicarious participation in their thrilling, sordid adventures” (126). Corrinne’s ominous piece refuses to identify who “she” is that is being molested, but still pointedly addresses the foster care system, the people at school, and the various other “people out there that care” about the girl and yet have been unable or unwilling to intervene in her abuse. She shares the tactics of many of the ArtSafe participants, who reject the confessional expectations of the institution, recontextualizing the story of their convictions to include the offenses that first happened to *them*.

According to de Certeau, institutional structures are the basis for strategic control, and this is perhaps clearest in the example of a correctional institution, where identities, relationships, and behaviors are determined by an individual’s location within the institution. Tactical resistances require tactical *displacements* of dominant discursive strategies through carefully timed appropriations and effacements that subvert institutional identities and assert new ones. These subversive transformations of the physical and discursive spaces that define incarceration in America are, perhaps, exactly the kinds of transformations intended in art-making: Charles H. Lawson, an inmate at Grateford Prison in Pennsylvania, argues that through art “we can and will start to win back most of our distracted youth and give meaning to our displaced men and women,” and encourages his audience to use art to “meet these ends and start transforming thinking, behavior and, subsequently, lives” (Lawson). In their art and writing these students find ways to create new subjectivities while still staying below the institutional radar, and in doing encourage us to take a closer look at both the circulation of larger, public discourses about criminality and incarceration and the rhetorical tactics used by individuals in their responses to them.

**Notes**

1. According to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Statistics the number of prisoners under federal and state correctional authority increased by 2.8% in 2006 to 1,570,861; the current rate of population growth, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, is 0.9 percent.
2. IRB approval 2007B0052
3. Hendrick's drawings were collected with other works produced in the ArtSafe class for use in the publication *A Caged Bird*. ArtSafe owns the publication rights to all of the pictures collected for potential use in, as well as those appearing in, *A Caged Bird*. All images shown here produced by inmates at the Ohio Reformatory for Women are used by permission of ArtSafe. Images produced by residents at the juvenile corrections facility were collected during my fieldwork and are used by permission of the artists and, when applicable, their parent or legal guardian.
4. Interview June 2007

## Images

Figure 1

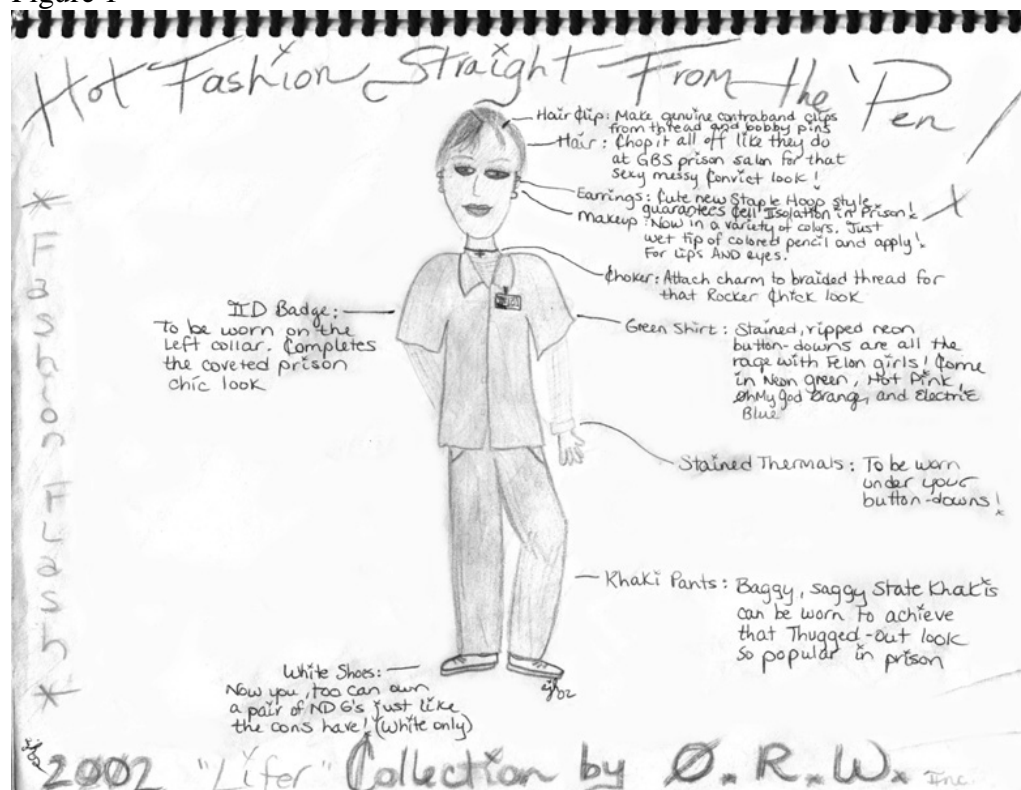


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

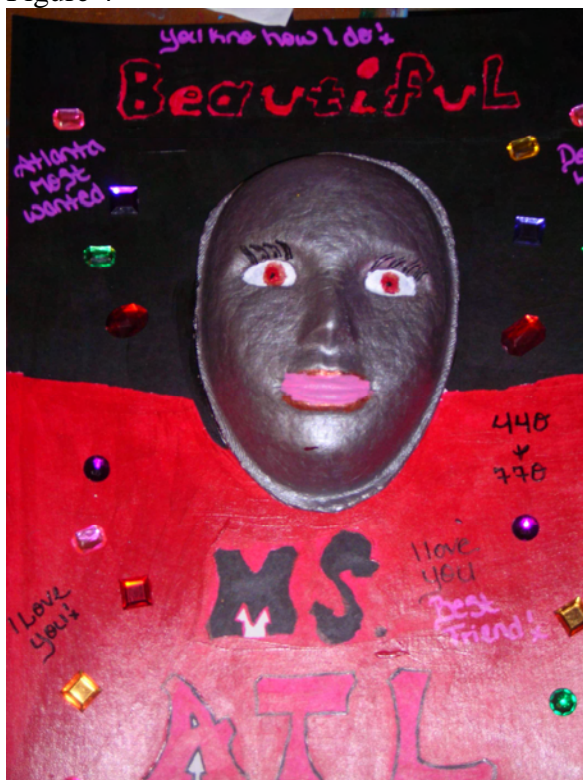






Figure 7



Figure 8





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